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Shell Rings of the Late Archaic - 1997

South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology--University of South Carolina

South Carolina Archaeology Week

"Shell Rings of the Late Archaic"

September 27 - October 4, 1997

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Shell Rings of the Late Archaic

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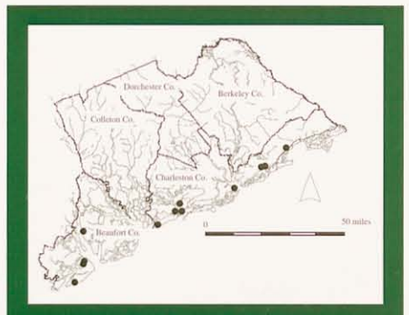
National Park Service, Southeast Archeological Center, Savannah River Archaeological Research Program, U S Forest Service, **Chicora Foundation, Inc., and Palmetto Research Institute, Inc.**
DESIGNED BY
John and Anita Cable, Palmetto Research Institute, Inc.

What Are Shell Rings?

The shell rings that dot the sea islands of coastal South Carolina were made some 3,000 to 4,000 years ago by Native Americans belonging to a cultural period archaeologists refer to as Late Archaic. This was a period of great changes throughout much of the eastern United States. Populations increased, pottery technology was invented and dispersed, economies transformed from simple, nuclear family foraging to complex bulk collecting of wild resources and incipient domesticated plant cultivation, and, at least in some regions, monumental earthworks were constructed suggesting the development of more advanced societies. There is still a great deal of controversy concerning the function and role of shell rings in Late Archaic societies. These features can be quite large, ranging from 40 to 250 meters (about 130 to 820 feet) in diameter and extend from as little as 0.6 to 4 meters (about 2 to 13 feet) in height. Some archaeologists have suggested that they are merely the product of gradual accumulation of shell and other domestic refuse on habitation sites and served no sacremental purpose whatsoever. Yet others have argued that they are indeed the remains of monuments purposely constructed for sacred and/or secular purposes.



Shell Rings Occur on the Sea Islands of South Coastal South Carolina.

Archaic Mounds Across the Southeast

The idea that shell rings were intentionally built ceremonial mounds has had a long history of development both within South Carolina and in Georgia and northern Florida where shell rings also occur. Most of this speculation has turned around settlement pattern studies that suggest shell ring sites were important centers for group activities and integrated a hinterland of small hamlets and villages. Recently, evidence has begun to show that contemporary ringed and solid earthen mounds in other portions of the Southeast were intentionally constructed and probably functioned as ceremonial monuments to integrate regional populations, a finding that adds credence to the hypothesized ceremonial function of shell rings. Michael Russo of the National Park Service has devoted considerable energy to the study of Archaic mounds and the following article nicely summarizes his understanding of this subject and its implications for explaining shell rings.

THE FUNCTIONS OF ARCHAIC MOUNDS

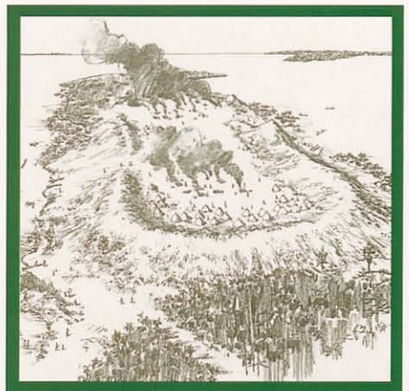
By Michael Russo
Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Until recently archaeologists thought that the shell rings that dot the Atlantic Coast from South Carolina to Northeast Florida were the oldest intentionally built large-scale constructions in the United States. However, new data from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida indicate that ceremonial shell and earth mounds were being constructed during the same period and up to a thousand years earlier by other Southeastern peoples. Intriguingly, many of these earlier constructions tend to be circular or semi-circular, suggesting an historic link between the Archaic mound builders and shell ring builders. However, none of the mound complexes achieve the symmetry found in some of the shell rings of South Carolina and Georgia, and aside from the generally circular shape and monumental size, there is no evidence that suggests that the shell rings and Archaic mound complexes are historically or functionally connected. The geographical areas where the early mounds and the later rings are found do not overlap. In addition, some of the proposed functions for shell rings (e.g., circular refuse piles, fish traps, living floors) do not seem applicable to mound complexes. Most mound complexes are not made of shell refuse, but rather of earth, and most contain large gaps and stand at distances from water resources that preclude their use as traps.

Nonetheless, there are commonalities that link Archaic rings and mounds. Both architectural features seem to have been built by egalitarian groups that subsisted largely on fisheries resources in the absence of economically significant domesticated crops. And both shell rings and Archaic mounds typically do not contain burials contemporaneous with their construction, nor elaborate ceremonial goods reflective of social hierarchies so common in the Woodland and Mississippian cultures that followed. Thus, the primary function of both Archaic mounds and shell rings does not appear to have been as places of burial of ranked individuals.

A Reconstruction of the 6,000 Year Old Watson Brake Earthen Mound Complex in Northeastern Louisiana.

So what was the purpose of the mounds and Late Archaic shell rings? Did they serve similar functions? Well, the jury is still out on that question. We still do not know what these public works represent: were they ceremonial centers ,monuments, or simply living places. In regard to shell rings, the controversy has often seemed unresolvable. Intentionally and precisely configured unlike any other living place known in the prehistoric Southeast, rings surely must have represented something significant to the belief system of the builders. On the other hand, rings were built primarily from the same garbage commonly found at amorphous shell midden sites elsewhere in the region. Thus, rings may represent nothing more than structurally distinct living sites whose unusual shape is all that distinguishes them from other Archaic shell middens. The debate goes on. However, with the recent discovery of even earlier semi-circular Archaic mound complexes whose ceremonial significance is far more obvious in their size, geographic location, layout, and use of non-refuse building materials, the acceptance of shell rings as being built by peoples who were not simply wandering nomads is being given more serious consideration by archaeologists.



A Reconstruction of Village Life at the Horr's Island Site, a 4,000 to 6,000 Year Old Sand and Shell Ring and Mound Complex Located in Southwestern Florida.

With the largest Archaic mound complexes extending greater than 250 meters (820 feet) and the tallest mounds reaching 6 to 8 meters (20 to 26 feet) in height, and the largest shell rings 65 to 250 meters across (210 to 820 feet) and 4 meters (13 feet) high, the mounds and rings represented the largest architectural features being constructed in the New World in their time span. Despite their relatively simple, egalitarian social organization both Archaic shell ring and mound builders were capable of organizing and feeding the large labor forces necessary for constructing public works of sizes that would not be matched in North America for thousands of years by more complex societies. More than anything else this is the most surprising aspect of the mystery surrounding these early architects. Peoples of the Archaic period 6,000 to 3,000 years ago have been long thought by archaeologists to have been distributed in simple, semi-wandering bands subsisting on foraged wild resources. The size, extension, and character of these Archaic monuments suggest another picture, one in which, for the first time in North America, human groups were able to successfully harvest bulk natural resources at a level that allowed relatively large populations to settle at locations on a permanent basis. We can now begin to view the later part of the Archaic period as a time in which the shared beliefs of entire communities became manifest in monumental public works of mounds and shell rings whose scale and wonder would endure for millennia.

About the Front

The photograph is a picture of Fig Island Shell Ring taken by Skipper Keith in the 1970s. This is the largest shell ring in South Carolina measuring 92 meters in diameter and ascending to a height of nearly 3 meters. A backhoe trench bisecting the ring interior has been removed by digital imaging. The border of the photograph is comprised of a number of ornately carved bone pins recovered by Antonia Waring from his work near Savannah, Georgia in the 1930s and 1940s. It is speculated that these implements were used as decorative hair pins and/or bodkins. The large designs displayed on the far right side of the poster represent punctated and incised motifs commonly seen on the exterior of ceramic bowls manufactured during this time period.

The Gradual Accumulation Theory

A major proponent of the gradual accumulation theory of shell ring formation is Michael Trinkley who found support for this interpretation through his excavations at two Charleston County Shell Rings.

THE LIGHTHOUSE POINT AND STRATTON PLACE SHELL RINGS

By Michael Trinkley
Chicora Foundation, Inc.

One of the earliest professional references to the shell rings of South Carolina and Georgia was a short letter by William McKinley in 1872 which appeared in the Smithsonian Institute's *Annual Report*. He commented that the rings were "doubtless for councils or games." Ever since, archaeologists have proposed all sorts of unusual explanations for the enigmatic shell rings. One archaeologist even went so far as to reveal that their meaning had been made known to him in a dream! In spite of the interest in these sites, relatively little work was ever done on any them and much of what has been excavated has regrettably never been published and never been available to the public.

The most extensive research on South Carolina's shell rings comes from several seasons of excavations in the late 1970s and early 1980s conducted at the Lighthouse Point and Stratton Place rings, both located in Charleston County. Over 2,000 square feet were meticulously excavated at Lighthouse Point on James Island and over 1,400 square feet were excavated at Stratton Place, north of Charleston on the edge of the Francis Marion National Forest.

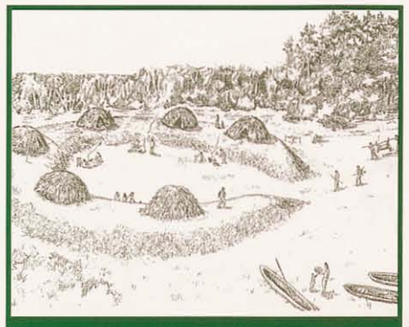
Work at these sites, when compared to what little is known about other rings, suggests that while not all of the rings are identical, their similarities far outweigh their differences. In particular, all of the sites for which there are good data seem to have four distinct site areas which have distinctive artifacts and which probably were scenes of very different activities.

Research reveals that artifact density is highest in the ring midden, with the number of artifacts declining very quickly within 50 feet of these rings. And while the interior certainly doesn't exhibit large quantities of materials, our research has found that there are fairly large quantities of highly fragmented remains in the "clear" centers. Soil chemistry parallels these findings, with nutrients typically associated with occupant and refuse disposal low outside the ring, peaking under the midden, and declining toward the center.

Excavation has revealed that the ring is composed of varying proportions of shell, animal bone, pottery, soil, and other artifacts that are lensed and highly crushed. Most of the soil from this midden is probably wind blown, collecting over years of occupation and subsequent abandonment. Of particular interest to archaeologists is the banding and crushing within the middens — very clear evidence of what are called "occupation floors," or areas where people were actually living. Within the midden are numbers of large pits, used to steam shellfish. At the base of the midden, where they are well preserved in the typically yellow sand subsoil, are numerous post holes, the remains of structures.

At the inner edge of the ring there is a different type of feature — smaller pits filled with very hard lime concretions, created by the burning of hot fires in the shell midden. These smaller pits appear to have been used for cooking meats, like the deer, raccoon, and especially fish so commonly used by the occupants of these shell rings.

Likewise, at the outer edge of the rings archaeologists have found quantities of what are called coprolites, or fossilized human feal remains. Apparently, the occupants of the sites walked just over the edge of the ring, close to its toe, to relieve themselves. These coprolites tell us much about the diet of the shell ring inhabitants, including that many fish were boiled and eaten bones and all. Even the remains of catfish skulls are present in the coprolites!



Artist's Reconstruction of Small Social Unit Occupying a Shell Ring Formed Through Gradual Accumulation of Shell and Rubish.

Moving from the inner edge to the interior of the ring, pottery declines, but is not absent. The presence of soil chemicals also suggests that some activities were taking place in the ring interior.

The research from these sites indicates that the rings were gradually formed habitation sites, with occupation taking place on the rings. The rings were formed from kitchen refuse, particularly shellfish and animal bone. Large steaming pits and post holes are found in the midden areas, whereas roasting pits are found on the edges of the rings. The relatively clear interiors appear to have been used for communal activities.

Whatever enigma and mystery the shell rings posed to researchers 25 years ago has been swept away by careful research and examination of the sites' archaeology. But that, of course, is the purpose of archaeology — to help us better understand how people hundreds, or thousands, of years ago lived.

The Ceremonial Mound Theory

The single greatest obstacle to unraveling the mystery of the shell rings is that modern archaeologists have had very little opportunity to excavate and study these features first hand and when they have the rings selected have been severely impacted and largely destroyed by shell borrowing activities. John Cable has recently reviewed the available records from the better preserved South Carolina shell rings excavated in the 1960s and concludes that these features could very well represent intentionally built ceremonial and/or public monuments. The evidence leading him to this conclusion is presented below.

NEW EVIDENCE FOR THE POSSIBLE CEREMONIAL FUNCTION OF SHELL RINGS

By John Cable
Palmetto Research Institute

Certainly when one considers the monumental size of shell rings and their strikingly symmetrical shape it is natural to wonder if they were intentionally constructed. As Michael Trinkley has amply demonstrated though, when the archaeological evidence is examined closely it is quite reasonable to conclude that these features were simply built up haphazardly over a period of time by people discarding food debris and other refuse adjacent to their houses, which were, not coincidentally, arranged in a ring pattern. I first became skeptical of the gradual accumulation theory, however, while conducting a survey for the US Forest Service around Sewee Shell Ring, on the Francis Marion National Forest near McClellanville, SC. During this survey a number of small artifact concentrations were identified which yielded Awendaw style pottery identical to that recovered by Dr. William Edwards from his excavations at Sewee Shell Ring in the early 1960s, indicating that the ring and the concentrations were probably formed at the same time. Moreover, the concentrations were of the same size range (20 to 60 meters in diameter) and composition of contemporary sites that we had been finding throughout other locations on the Forest and interpreting as single and multiple family residences.

A logical conclusion from this evidence was that a number of Late Archaic families were living, for some season(s) of the year, not on the ring, but rather around it. One would have to ask then, why were not these families also creating rings from the discard of domestic refuse? Clearly one explanation for this evidence is that the ring was the focus of ceremonial or public activities for the families scattered around its perimeter and that the ring was purposefully constructed by these residents. Would this interpretation imply that no one lived on the ring top? Not necessarily, since we know that in later cultural periods individuals of high rank and prestige would sometimes occupy the apex of monumental earthworks.

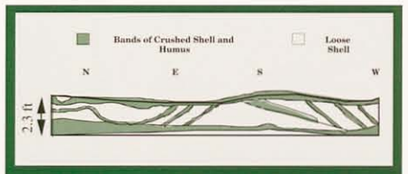
Over the next several years I began to sporadically study the more complete stratigraphic profiles of the Sea Pines and Skull Creek shell rings to see if these might provide further evidence concerning shell ring formation. These rings are located in Beaufort County and were excavated by Dr. Alan Calmes in the middle to late 1960s. It was Calmes' impression that the rings had been formed by gradual accumulation through the rather haphazard process of piling shell heaps one on top of another over a long period of time and he provided as proof very provocative fold-out stratigraphic profiles from 5 x 5 foot excavation squares into the apex of two of these rings.

What Calmes illustrated was a series of thin crushed sand and shell lenses overlying unconsolidated deposits of whole oyster shell and domestic refuse. The deposits were arcuate in shape, which could indicate the presence of shell piles, and the crushed sand and shell lenses were interpreted as living surfaces that had been transformed by periods of trampling. Unfortunately Calmes did not extend excavations to include a series of profiles from different locations along the ring apexes to establish that these arcuate deposits were indeed piles or whether they might represent the successive and more massive stages of monumental ring construction. In both instances the crushed shell and sand lenses appear to cap earlier arcs or rings and could very well evidence sequential and intentional building episodes in which the rings grew symmetrically and conentrically in height and breadth.

The small number of crushed shell lenses and their clarity of form certainly argues against the gradual accumulation theory of ring formation, since we would expect much more numerous, thinner and intergrading lenses in a continuously building refuse heap. Moreover, we would expect the deposits to be piled one on top of another with the oldest at the greatest vertical depth. Through my own analysis of pottery types from the various stratigraphic contexts of available shell rings I have found that the deposits were layed down horizontally rather than one on top of another, a pattern which would better fit the capping process that would occur if the rings had been intentionally constructed.

But what kind of social and ceremonial activity would create a monument built essentially out of food refuse and domestic grabage? One possible model was recently brought to light by Dr. Judith Bense of the University of West Florida. Puzzled by the small ring middens of dirt and domestic refuse dating to the Swift Creek period in West Florida, a cultural period several thousand years younger than the Late Archaic of South Carolina, she was happily able to observe a ceremony conducted by representatives of the modern Creek tribe in which the food refuse from occupying the traditional dance ground during the ceremonial season was swept to the perimeter to form a roughly circular refuse heap. Since we know that the interior of shell rings are typically devoid of garbage, she argues that a similar and antecedent ceremony was practiced at shell rings; their much larger height and breadth dimensions being made possible by the bulk processing of oyster bars during feasts.

If we can assume that each of the crushed shell and sand lenses in the Sea Pines ring represents the capping of a single construction episode, then we can further deduce that shell rings will normally be shell rings were used for more than 100 years, construction would not seem to have taken place yearly, but perhaps on an average cycle of 10 to 20 years. Does this mean that ceremonies were infrequent? I would think not. Instead we might conceive of the ceremony moving from one ring to the next on a yearly basis, which would ultimately bring an unusually large regional population together at different places each year to conduct the business of mate exchange and networking.



Calmes' Stratigraphic Profile of Sea Pines Shell Ring

The Symbolism of Circles

The symbolic significance of circles may have its root in the arrangement of Archaic settlements. Throughout the world people with simple social organizations arrange their huts in semi-circular and circular patterns and this arrangement is commonly encountered in archaeological sites in both the Old and New Worlds. Ken Sassaman's work in and around the famous Stalling's Island site on the Middle Savannah River, a contemporary of the coastal shell rings, suggests that this arrangement also typified the settlements of theLate Archaic Period in South Carolina and he elaborates on its symbolic implications.

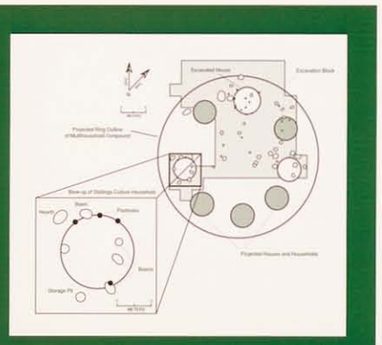
THE STALLING'S CULTURE

By Kenneth Sassaman
South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology

Several miles up the Savannah River from Augusta, Georgia lies one of the most famous archaeological sites of Late Archaic age, Stallings Island, as it is known, holds an accumulation of artifacts, shellfish and other food remains over 300 feet long, 150 feet wide, and up to 10 feet thick. These deposits record a history of intensive occupation beginning some 5,000 years ago. The ensuing 15 centuries witnessed remarkable changes in lifestyle and culture, including the appearance of the region's first pottery. In fact, Stallings Island is the namesake of this early ware, Stallings Fiber-Tempered pottery.

Aside from its early pottery and associated material culture, Stallings Island remains as mysterious as its shell-ring counterparts on the coast. Its massive accumulations of refuse are testimony to long-term human occupation, but for how many people? Did they live at Stallings Island throughout the year or only seasonally? What type of houses did they build and occupy, and how were they arranged as a community?

These and other questions cannot be addressed with our current knowledge about Stallings Island. Granted, the site has been investigated on numerous occasions, but earlier archaeologists had different problems in mind. Even so, Stallings Island is so large and complex that answers to most questions do not come easy. In recent years, attention has turned to the smaller Stallings Culture sites in the middle Savannah River valley. Sites such as Mims Point, in Edgefield County, South Carolina, offer better potential for reconstructing the details of community life because they were occupied for shorter periods of time by smaller groups.



Inferred Circular Arrangement of Huts at Mims Point, a Stalling's Culture Site on the Savannah River.

Through the joint efforts of the US Forest Service and SCIAA, excavations at Mims Point are showing that houses of the Stallings Culture probably were arranged in ring-like fashion around a communal plaza. Eight or more small houses could have been occupied simultaneously, amounting to a community of some 30 to 50 people. Radiocarbon dating reveals an occupation span of about 3,600 to 3,640 years ago. The seasons of occupation are uncertain, although the bounty of fish and turtle remains recovered from deep pits are evidence for warm weather. Clearly, this small community of people was part of the larger Stallings population, and they undoubtedly had regular contact with the coastal neighbors with whom they shared many cultural features.

The new evidence for community patterning at Mims Point raises the possibility that household compounds at Stallings Island also were organized in ring-like fashion. This is not to suggest that Stallings Island was a shell ring, for its deposits are indeed much different than those of coastal sites. Still, a circular pattern of houses is consonant with shell-ring lay out. Combined with the obvious similarities in material culture, parallels in community organization point to possible historical connections between upcountry and lowcountry populations. At least one coastal shell ring, Chesterfield in Beaufort County, contains pottery that is nearly identical to pottery from Stallings Island in both technology and decoration. We cannot be certain what these similarities mean, although there is little doubt that the fates of these geographically distinct populations were inextricably linked. Perhaps the rings that structured communities symbolized their unity and allegiance. Alternatively, as closed, unbroken configurations, rings may have embodied the social boundaries of exclusion that were themselves grounds for competition and dispute. In less than two centuries after reaching a fluorescence of cultural expression in the middle Savannah, Stallings Island and surrounding sites were abandoned, as its people relocated elsewhere to begin a new era with new identity and purpose.

Epilogue

Irrefutable evidence of the function of South Carolina's shell rings has eluded archaeologists to this day. Many of the rings have been severely damaged by shell mining activities , looting, and beach erosion over the past two centuries and the number of rings with full stratigraphic profiles continues to dwindle. It is fortunate that at least one of these features, Sewee Shell Ring, has been set aside for preservation through the auspices of the US Forest Service. The ruin serves as the center piece of the Sewee Shell Mound Historical Area on the Francis Marion National Forest just north of Charleston. Here an interpretive trail leads to the ring , which can be viewed from a 120 foot long boardwalk.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCES IN SOUTH CAROLINA

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